

Gypsy meets villager... and they



The anticipated clash between gypsy leader Cliff Codona and Cottenham parish council chair Paula Johnson ended in a polite and positive tea party.

Photograph by David Rose

Euan Ferguson got the two sides together the differences melted away. So why is everyone so angry about the issue?

PREJUDICE makes life so much simpler, don't you find? Reactionary prejudice, liberal prejudice. We know just where we're coming from, and for a while the world seems a little more manageable. Then you come across the gypsies.

Here, for instance, are some of my own fast reactions this past week. On reading a quote from Wiltshire North Tory MP James Gray on the explosion of gypsies and travelling people in England. "Now is the time for us to be tough. There are tens of thousands of people in caravans in Italy and Romania who are watching how we deal with the situation. If we are soft on it, they will be coming."

I laugh, as you would with any pronouncement which sounds like the blurb for a Fifty's B-flick.

When I put down the phone on a prominent member of a rich village community who has just told me, solemnly: "I won't sit down with Pikey," I wonder both what it is about the absence of the indefinite article which renders the epithet so much more dislikable, and why it is these days in rural England that the phrase "prominent in the community" heralds less a friar of respect than a shiver of full council sites.

And then, later that night, in the dark and rain, as I try to find the nice gypsy people to hear their woes, I am chased back through barbed wire and mud by a pack of bad yellow dogs being egged on by filthy, unhelpful children and find myself thinking "terrible gypso scum".

Next morning, walking the banks of the Thames by Pangbourne in Berkshire, where Kenneth Grahame set *Wind in the Willows*, it was possible to be dismissive of the irritating pretensions of the homes and yet think, well, if that was my irritatingly pretty home then, with the best liberal credentials in the world, I still wouldn't be happy to open its curtains every morning and see instead of an irritatingly pretty waterbank, a thumpingly ugly rusted skip.

You can see the problem. I was changing irrational prejudices faster than a Home Secretary. Better, perhaps, to try to get the two sides together, for once away from lazy media sniping between the people who hate gypsies and the people who hate the people who hate gypsies, and find out what's going wrong.

YET WHEN *The Observer* does manage to get the two sides together, at Cottenham in Cambridgeshire, the common ground is astonishing enough to have the most rampant tabloid mud-splatters and woolliest liberals grinding teeth at the lack of sparks.

Cliff Codona of the National Travellers Action Group can remember every sub-section of every piece of planning legislation enacted in his lifetime relating to gypsies. He has to remember he is happy to confess he can't read or write. Paula Johnson is the chair of Cottenham Parish Council, which has been at the centre of one of the most bitter disputes of the past year, since 60 travellers arrived unexpectedly on a local site. The Cottenham site has been used by gypsies for the past 40 years, in general with quiet tolerance from the

local councils to provide sites for travellers. At around the same time, parking their trailers on verges and other public places became not a civil but a criminal offence.

There are an estimated 200,000 members of the "travelling community" in Britain, over 80 per cent of them with legal homes and businesses.

The frontages of our seaside towns would be empty without them, and about 6,000 living legally on the remaining 224 official (and now checkable) land for sites.

Cliff, sitting a touch awkwardly on a too-soft sofa, remains quiet, alert, wary, and then his face breaks into a smile as she continues: "We completely agree. We're all adults, your community and ours, and we have to live together, so it's surely a question of getting the government to see what must be done."

She was "deeply disappointed", she added, with the government's response to the report - the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister said the proposal was unlikely to be taken up. There is some discussion here over why the Government should be so blindly intransigent: the consensus is that it's wary of a "soft on gypsies" headline in the *Daily Mail*.

Cliff is delighted at their conclusion, and tells them so. "We know we've annoyed people with the planning stuff, turning the letter of the law to our advantage. For once. But you people seem to realise, now, that we had no alternative. And don't think we enjoy it. Appeals, procedures, endless questions - it's harrowing, and endless, and tiring, and often it's demeaning. We would give anything to not have to go through it, just to be allowed to live and work."

What did he think, asked Paula, of the parish council's recommendation, that there should be a legally binding size limit on any permitted site? Cliff thought that was dandy. Ideally there should

"settled" community, but the size and suddenness of the influx has caused a huge rise in tensions, with some locals threatening to withhold council tax unless the "nuisance" is removed.

But as Paula welcomes Cliff

into the large and comfortable home of David North, one of the better kind of "prominent residents", there is far more mutual ground than any reading of the press would suggest.

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referring to that recent cross-party paper which urged the government to rescind the 1994 legislation and oblige councils again to provide suitable land for sites.

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